

MINISTER'S MESSAGE

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2020

KNOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Déjà Vu !

Based on Exodus 17:1-7

I don't know what to tell you, folks! It's like we've heard this record before. And we have.

But the people were thirsty for water there, and they grumbled against Moses. They said, "Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to make us and our children and livestock die of thirst?" (v3).

Last week, we heard almost the exact same words, in the same verse of the previous chapter:

The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." (16:3)

I'm almost embarrassed a little, for the way the Chosen People are behaving. This constant whining and complaining at each step along the way. I mean, what did the people really think things were going to be like in the desert: a fun afternoon at the beach? Where's your courage? Where's your backbone? Where's your trust? Ahhhh! Perhaps that's where the problem lies.

Last week, there was a lot of grumbling about the lack of food. And I preached about grumbling and complaining. This week, there is a lot of complaining about the lack of water. And no, I'm not going to preach another sermon about grumbling and complaining. As we've already noted, the author of this tale has used the same tone, and the same phrasing of the words from Chapter 16 to Chapter 17, which he did on purpose! The writer wanted us to notice something: a pattern. A pattern of behaviour by the people. So, let's look a little more closely.

Moses and the Chosen People had stopped in a place name Rephidim, which means 'resting place.' It was a location, known by travelers and traders, along a well-used route through the desert. Perhaps it was an oasis, like in a Lawrence Oliver movie. Perhaps it was just a rough well carved out of a pile of rocks. What is important here, is that it was a known place where you could water your animals, and fill your water skins. Moses and Aaron would have known about this place, and they would have planned their route through the desert carefully, to ensure there was water along the way.

But for whatever reason, the well was dry when they arrived. The people were hot, tired, parched, and their water supplies were low. There was not enough water to last until the next well, so the people began to panic. Fair enough. While one could live without food for a while, it was impossible to travel through the desert without water. It was do or die, right here, right now. The people turned to Moses once again, and said, "Fix it! Call upon this God of yours, and fix this situation right now!"

The scriptures tell us, that once again, Moses pleaded with YHWH for assistance, and once again, YHWH listened, and provided. Water rushed from the rocks. Much was needed for all the animals and the people. So much so, that Moses' arms grew tired, and others held them up for him, until all were satisfied.

Are you beginning to see the pattern yet?

- The Chosen People run into a problem.
- They complain bitterly, demanding solutions but not really helping to find the solution.
- Moses pleads with YHWH for assistance.
- YHWH provides.

- The people are satisfied, for the moment.
- The Chosen People run into a problem...

And so the cycle begins once again. As you can well imagine, when travelling with a large group of people and all their animals, and their belongings and their children: there's going to be a lot of problems along the way. No wonder this trip took forty years!

But this pattern gets to be an old story quickly. If you've ever spent time with someone who lives their life moving from one problem to the next, instead of one blessing to the next, you have discovered three things (at least):

- That person never runs out of problems to complain about.
- Being around that person wears you out, and pulls you down, if you spend too much time with them.
- That person has a really difficult time ever being content or happy about much of anything.

You see, the deeper issue at hand here, is trust. It really wasn't about being hungry, or being thirsty, or even about crossing the Red Sea. The struggle for the Chosen People was trusting that this invisible God was real and believing that He was leading them on this journey; that He was really going to solve the problems along the way; that one day, they really were going to make it to this place called the Promised Land.

Saying it is one thing. Dreaming about it, and imagining what life might be like is fanciful.

But believing it, and making it happen: that's hard work.

At some point, you have to trust.

You have to trust yourself.

You have to trust those around you.

You have to trust God.

And that can be very hard work.

What I find remarkable through all this, is that each time the people pushed Moses to 'prove' God's provision, or guidance, or safety, or deliverance: God provided, guided, and delivered. Over and over and over again. He never stopped helping them. He never gave up on them. It's easy to sit our favourite chair and read this story, frustrated with the Chosen People and their need to push and demand of God over and over. But are we any different?

God provides, and we ask for more.

God guides, and we go the other way.

God delivers us out of difficulty, and we don't even stop to offer a prayer of thanks.

Yet, that's what steadfast means. No matter how often we fail, turn away, refuse to cooperate, or demand of Him, God continues to shower us with grace, and forgiveness, and love, and affection, and compassion. "If only you would truly trust Me," he says. "If only you believed that I am here for

you. We wouldn't have to do this song and dance over and over and over again. I'm not going anywhere. I'm here for you. I'm staying with you. Lean on me, and I will never, never let you fall."

We'd like to think that we are so much better than the simple people of so long ago. We have education, intellect, and wisdom of ages past. But if indeed, we are so much better, than why does our world suffer so? Why do we struggle privately with anxiety and stress and worry about tomorrow and all its troubles?

Perhaps we are not as wise or as trusting as we assume.

As Moses and the people prepared to leave Rephidim, their animals watered and their waterskins full, Moses renamed the well, Massah and Meribah [testing and quarrelling] forever immortalized because of all the bickering and doubt and name calling and demanding that happened there.

Let us not be remembered because of our fickle faith.

Let us be remembered because of our faithfulness to a steadfast God, in whom we lean on and in whom we trust.

Amen.